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Farmhouse Cider Embracing the F-Word

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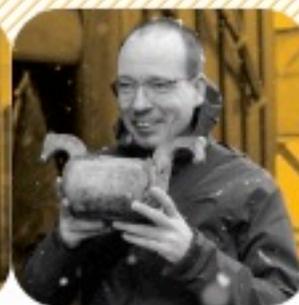
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CIDERMAKING

The F-W Word

What's It Mean to Be a Farmhouse Cider?

As with farmhouse ales, not every farmhouse cider is made on the farm. Yet the word tends to evoke an image and accompany certain traits—and there is plenty to appeal to drinkers looking for old-fashioned flavors with a sense of place. **By Beth Demmon**

RUSTIC. FUNKY. TRADITIONAL.

These are the kinds of words often used to describe farmhouse-style beverages. Much like the word “farmhouse” itself when applied to drinks, they’re evocative but lack clear definition. In brewing, farmhouse is more state-of-mind than specific designation, applied to styles as varied as saisons, wood-aged, mixed-culture beers, and kveik-fermented raw ales.

It’s not so different with cider. Even without concrete guidelines, “farmhouse” has appeal—and it just seems to work. When producers use it, certain characteristics—and consumer expectations—tend to emerge.

“When you say the word ‘farmhouse,’ a lot of experienced drinkers know exactly what that means to them,” says Brian Wing, cofounder and cidemaker at Green Bench Mead & Cider in St. Petersburg, Florida. “A lot of people think funk. ... Funky flavors, barnyard, farmhouse—exactly what it says.”

Farmhouse ciders tend to be dry but balanced, with an easy drinkability and distinct fermentation profile. From there, forks in the road proliferate. There may be funk (or not). They might be fermented with wild or native yeasts, or strategically inoculated with specific strains. Alcohol content varies. *Brettanomyces* may or may not be present.

“What’s ‘farmhouse’ for one person is not ‘farmhouse’ for someone else,” says Brian Fairfield, head of quality assurance at Graft Cider in Newburgh, New York.

Graft is known for applying a craft-beer sensibility to their ciders, aiming to bridge the appeal of both. One of Graft’s core products is Farm Flor, which they describe as a “dry and tart oak-aged farmhouse cider.” Fairfield says they modeled it after Spanish ciders—which tend to be very tart, if not sour—while softening its acidity for American drinkers.

While farmhouse ales tend to be inspired to some degree by European brewing traditions, cider’s somewhat looser interpretation lets Graft and other cideries play with the verbiage. “A lot of times with beer, it’s like, ‘Here’s the category, this is what this style is,’” Fairfield says. “And for a lot of cideries, it’s like, ‘Well, this is what we say it is.’”

Using words familiar to beer enthusiasts is one way to help them decide whether they’d like to try a new beverage. “That’s really the only reason we’re using the term ‘farmhouse,’ ... to identify a character that hopefully the customer can start to narrow down,” says Khris Johnson, head brewer and co-owner at Green Bench Brewing, the beer side of the business. “It’s trying to build an expectation for what they’re getting into

when they order that specific thing.”

Some cider styles hark back to beer in ways that relate to the senses, as with similar mouthfeels, carbonation, or finishes. However, at Graft, Fairfield says “farmhouse” is a more direct avenue between the two beverages because of fermentation profiles as well as certain flavors.

So, if farmhouse beer remains open-ended, what makes a farmhouse cider?

Product Versus Place

There are at least two schools of thought when it comes to farmhouse ciders.

To some, “farmhouse” is literal—it should denote a beverage made on a farm. Apples, after all, grow on trees, and those trees tend to be on farms. Cidermakers aligned with a more traditional approach may consider only ciders made with apples grown, pressed, processed, and packaged in one place—sometimes labeled as “estate” ciders—to be worthy of the farmhouse designation. Also, there’s an argument to be made that a typical consumer would expect that meaning.

A second perspective is less about where it’s made than about how the final product is perceived. Can a cider that captures the rustic character associated with farmhouse ales qualify as a farmhouse cider, no matter how or where it’s made?

Johnson says that he has had—and will continue to have—many debates about the virtues and pitfalls of each viewpoint with other producers. “Is the setting what we’re talking about?” he asks. “Or is it the



“If I bring in great heirloom juice, put it in a barrel, and let it naturally ferment, I’m doing the same thing that you would be doing on a farm. I can use modern techniques and processes to end up with a beverage ... that tastes like it could have been made in those same old-fashioned ways.”

character? We could have philosophical debates forever.”

As an urban brewery and cidery, Green Bench occupies a unique space. Situated well below most viable hardiness zones for commercial orchards in the United States, Green Bench sources their juice from hundreds of miles away. Yet they ferment it naturally—the farmhouse way.

Wing says he expects some pushback when he uses the term, but he wonders: If his ciders meet the same quality standards as those made on a farm, and they act as a conduit for curious consumers to continue exploring cider, then what’s the problem?

“If I bring in great heirloom juice from New York, put it in a barrel, and let it naturally ferment, I’m doing the same thing that you would be doing on a farm,” he says. “I can use modern techniques and processes to end up with a beverage that I think fits in that category—that tastes like it could have been made in those same old-fashioned ways.”

Unpacking Rusticity, Funk, and Terroir

Not all farmhouse beverages are funky, but almost all get described as “rustic.” In cidemaking as in brewing, there are specific ways to evoke that less-than-specific impression. (For a deeper dive into that on the beer side, see “Brewing Saison: A Taste of Rustic,” beerandbrewing.com.)

“‘Rustic’ is an interesting word because it suggests some sort of primitive process,” Wing says.

Brewing farmhouse beer can be more hands-on, with countless opportunities for a brewer to intervene—including ingredient selection, mash, boil, and fermentation—to achieve a specific, desired outcome. However, if a cidemaker’s goal is to make a similarly “rustic” drink, the natural elements and apple variety play larger roles in the end product than technique.

Cider apples—another loosely defined and debated term, incidentally—often contain elevated levels of tannin, differentiating them from sweeter and more palatable eating apples. Like bitterness in a hop-forward beer, those tannins can contribute a more rustic character to cider.

“I think tannins when I think of farmhouse,” Fairfield says. That balance between acid and tannin, coupled with a dominant fermentation signature, is what he believes defines the soul of farmhouse ciders.

Wing goes further. He says that while farmhouse is “barely defined for cider ... there’s sort of a general idea out there. Generally, you’re talking naturally fermented with wild yeasts and bacteria—whatever’s on the apples when

you press. Minimal intervention, usually long fermentation, long aging, no pasteurization. Usually no filtration in those cases, either.”

Farmhouse doesn’t necessarily mean funky, and vice versa, but these terms both tend to emerge when cidemakers ferment using wild yeasts on the fruit rather than pitching. As with “rustic,” the word “funky” is vague—but it at least hints at what consumers can expect while communicating another typical trait of a farmhouse-cider experience.

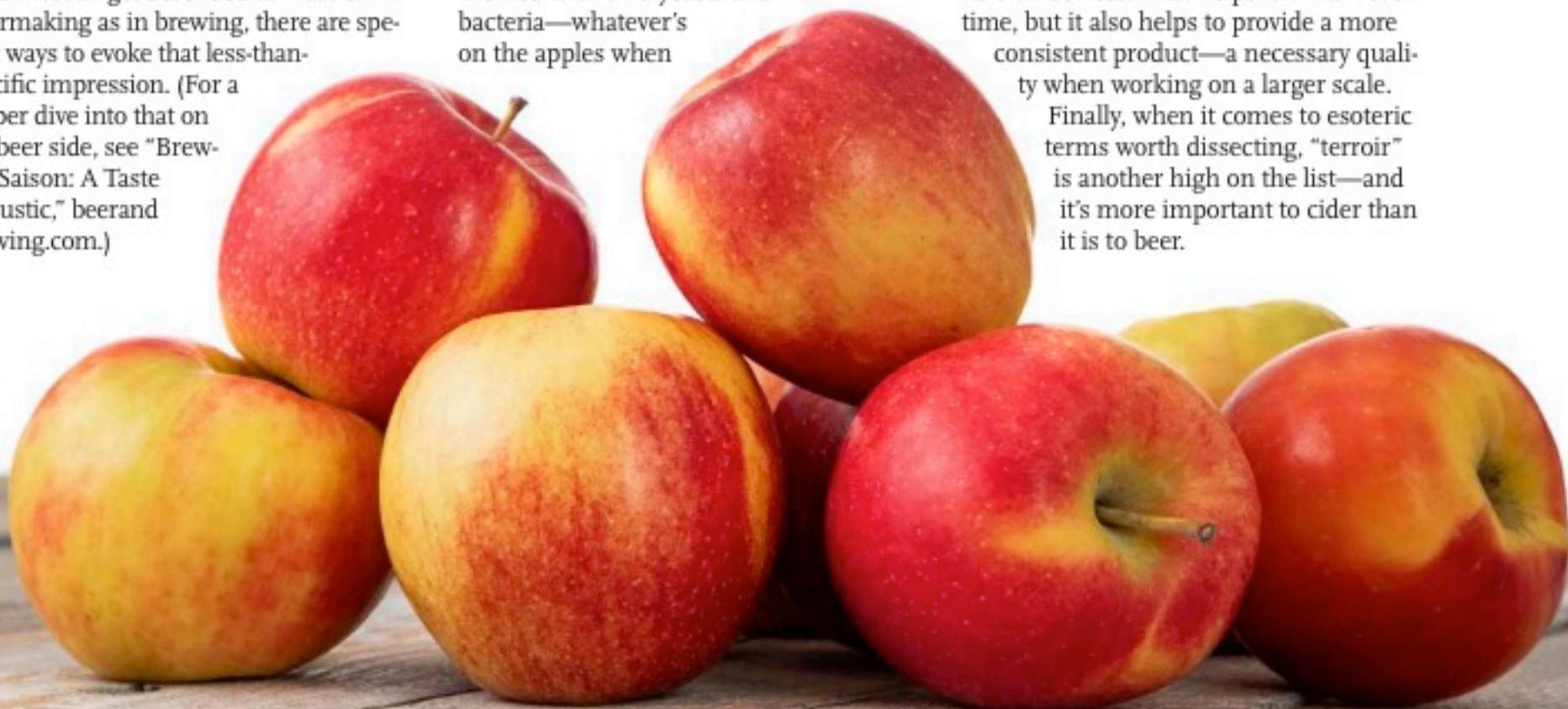
Descriptions from cidemakers can be telling. On its website, traditional estate cidery South Hill in Ithaca, New York, describes its Farmhouse as “rustic, complex. Bone-dry, unfiltered, unrefined, low or no sulfur. Natural wine. Not for everyone! Funky—a love-it-or-hate-it cider.”

ANXO Cider in Washington, D.C., makes Happy Trees, a “dry, tart, and funky cider,” using the native yeast found on Albemarle Pippin apples grown nearby in Virginia.

Drawing even nearer to beer parallels, Potter’s Craft Cider in Charlottesville, Virginia, bottles a product called Farmhouse Saison. It’s a cider made from Rome and York apples, the juice inoculated with a Belgian abbey yeast strain—rather than wild-fermented—to produce a fruity ester profile. It’s another variance in the seemingly infinite range of farmhouse possibilities.

At Graft, Fairfield says that Farm Flor gets what they call a “hybrid pitch”—they allow the natural yeast and bacteria to propagate, but they also pitch a wine yeast. By adding that yeast, they can complete fermentation in about two weeks, or about half the time it would take if left to its own devices. That helps with turnover time, but it also helps to provide a more consistent product—a necessary quality when working on a larger scale.

Finally, when it comes to esoteric terms worth dissecting, “terroir” is another high on the list—and it’s more important to cider than it is to beer.



Precious few brewers can source all the raw materials they need from one locale, let alone one farm. Cidermakers, on the other hand, can often source everything they need from one location. That gives them an advantage when it comes to creating geographically specific farmhouse ciders—even for urban producers who implement old-fashioned methods.

At Green Bench, Johnson says, they've been developing a house culture for years, using it on both the beer and cider sides of the business.

"In a lineup, you'll be able to drink our beer and be like, 'That's a Green Bench beer,' because we've developed a house rustic character," he says. "To me, that's the heart of 'farmhouse.' Everything we do is an agricultural product. So, no matter what, [even] if we didn't want to be, we are tied directly to terroir."

Capturing a sense of time and place cuts to the heart of a farmhouse-drink experience. Breweries such as Jester King in Austin and Scratch in Ava, Illinois, pride themselves on using as many local and foraged ingredients as possible. Cidermakers such as Left Bank in Catskill, New York, and Runcible in Mosier, Oregon, aim to do the same—just via different avenues.

Two Beverages Under One Farmhouse Roof?

There's no agreed-upon definition of what makes a farmhouse beverage, nor is there ever likely to be one.

However, Wing says that while beer and cider remain markedly different drinks, the farmhouse connection forms one of the clearest inroads between the two beverages. And given their closer connection to a primary ingredient, cider can actually encapsulate *more* of those variable farmhouse characteristics than beer can.

"In the right hands, apples can be super-delicate and super-complementary to all of that, and let that fermentation character really, really shine through in a way that sometimes doesn't happen as much in beer," Wing says.

Fairfield agrees, and he says he would encourage anyone who enjoys farmhouse ales to explore farmhouse ciders as well.

"There are enough similarities that people are attracted to [farmhouse cider], but there are enough differences that [keep people] coming back because they can't get that in beer," he says. Farmhouse cider can provide a perspective that's different enough to surprise and fascinate. "Just try a couple," he says.

No matter which camp you fall into—funky or clean, beer or cider, place or product—you might be surprised at what you find in the next barn over. 

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RESPECTIVE CIDERMAKERS

FIVE ON FIVE

Cider & Perry

With more than 1,000 cideries in North America—most quite small—it can be hard to know where to start. Here are five recommendations from the pros.



Keepsake River Valley Reserve

Jeremy Pryes, founder and head brewer, Pryes Brewing in Minneapolis

"Visiting Keepsake Cidery in Minnesota is always a treat. Surrounded by 50-plus types of apples, it's a tranquil escape. River Valley Reserve is a blend of Ellis Bitter, Chisel Jersey, and Keepsake apples, and it offers a balanced mix of acidity and tannin with tropical and stone-fruit flavors, alongside hints of smoke, leather, and hayloft. It's a fusion of English and Minnesota styles, made through spontaneous fermentation with no additives—just pure cider, crafted over time."



Eden Heirloom Blend

James Naeger, director of special projects, Schramm's Mead in Ferndale, Michigan

"This is an ice cider that sets the bar for cidermakers around the world. At Schramm's Orchards, we grow over 50 varieties of heirloom cider apples, and every time I drink a cider from Eden it makes me want to quit. How can you compete with perfection? Every Eden cider is a master class in a bottle, with an insanely high [quality-price ratio]. Don't tell anyone—buy as much as you can get your hands on."



Eve's Ciders 2022 Sparkling Perry

Chris Johnson, head brewer and co-owner, Green Bench in St. Petersburg, Florida

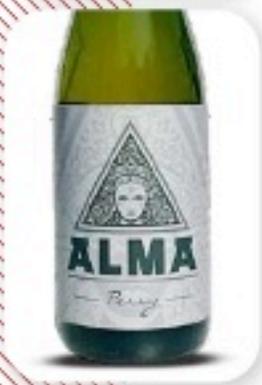
"One of my favorite ferments that I tried this year. ... Spritzy, clean, and so fresh, this perry is extremely fruity with incredible peach and refreshing smacked mint. There's such a nice minerality, almost slate and fresh river water. A wonderful expression of summer hikes and a gentle gulf-side breeze."



Son of Man Sagardo

David Coyne, cofounder, Obelisk Beer in Astoria, Oregon

"I think Sagardo, Son of Man's flagship cider, is the best. It's a Basque-style cider that's spontaneously fermented and aged in oak foeders. It's just funky enough and just hard enough. It's super-dry, but it's still full of apple and other fruit flavors. It's just great."



Alma Cider Perry

Monique Tribble, head cidemaker, Yonder Cider in Wenatchee, Washington

"Alma Cider holds a special place in my heart. Led by owner and passionate head cidemaker Dave [Klawer], their dedication to both the orchard and the art of cidemaking really shines through in everything they make. Spotting Alma at festivals is always exciting because I know they will be showcasing something exceptional. And while they make many great ciders, the Perry made with 100 percent perry pears is a real showstopper."

CIDERMAKER'S PERSPECTIVE

The Single Life

Christine Walter is owner and head cidemaker at Bauman's Cider, as well as a fifth-generation farmer living on land in Gervais, Oregon, that her family first homesteaded in 1895. Bauman's makes both traditional and modern ciders using apples and other fruits sourced as locally as possible. Here, she shares her process for transforming red-fleshed, acid-forward Mountain Rose apples into complex yet balanced heritage ciders. **As told to Beth Demmon**

CHRISTINE WALTER GREW UP pressing juice and selling fruit with her family. A decade ago, she realized they were missing an opportunity to ferment even a small percentage of the 40,000 or so gallons of apple juice they were pressing. She took it upon herself to read up on cidemaking and start making small batches on her own.

She had the fruit. She had the press. "I had nothing to lose," she says.

In 2016, Walter invested \$5,000 and started perfecting her recipes, selling at the farm store and soon moving into self-distribution. In 2023, Bauman's produced 140,000 gallons. After growing their business 50 percent every year over the past eight years, they opened their first taproom in the former Ecliptic Brewing space in Portland, Oregon, in April. That taproom will let them expand their output while keeping small-batch production on the farm.

Bauman's ciders fall into four different categories: year-round, harvest series,

seasonal, and limited release. Walter estimates their harvest-driven ciders make up about 13 percent of their overall volume, with most of their ciders falling under more modern styles. Even so, Bauman's has become one of the most respected producers of harvest-driven ciders in the United States. "Modern ciders pay your bills, so that you can afford to make the harvest-driven ciders that bring you so much joy," she says.

Here's how she does it.

Harvesting with Intention

"Unless there is impending disastrous weather conditions, [when] we're trying to get it off the trees in time to avoid something, then we are waiting until full starch conversion in the field. We're measuring, we're waiting for the right Brix, then we pick.

"If it's a high-tannin apple, you sweat it, which means you're letting it sit in the bins for a few days to weeks to get ideal pectin balance in the juice. Nothing that

doesn't have tannins gets sweated on purpose. We press it, and—partly driven by market forces and partly because I love to tell the story of a specific apple—I tend to always pick for single-varietal production. If I'm picking Golden Russet, I'm going to make a Golden Russet single-varietal unless I cannot—[if] we don't have the yield, we don't have the volume to fill a tank. Or, once it starts fermenting, if we're not loving the way it's going, we'll intervene and blend because some apples inherently have too high of a pH for fermenting on their own safely.

"But most of the time, when we're picking apples, we go into it intending to do single-varietals. If we get the single-varietal and it's finished cider, and then we taste it and we're like, 'Oh, it's missing something,' sometimes we can just stick it in barrels, or we can let it age for a minute. We've got an amphora we can stick it in, or we blend it with something else. So, that's kind of our mindset, to always go for the single-varietal. Because people love to buy single-varietals, even though it is a lot harder to make a fully balanced, well-rounded cider from a single-varietal than it is to do a blend. But it's always my goal."

Releasing Harvest-Driven Ciders Year-Round

"We want to sit on a lot of [harvest-driven ciders] for a while, to age the tannins and let them find themselves. If we do end up doing a blend rather than a single-varietal, we want to give it time to amalgamate the flavors so that it tastes like it belongs together. It's no problem to release it throughout the year—it's better. There's

"In [my] ideal world you would go to a bottle shop, and you would pick out three single-varietals of the same varietal by three different producers. You could put them side by side and say, 'How much of this difference [among them] is because of the maker? How much is because of the land? How much is because of the geographical location?'"



no way you would want to release all harvest-driven ciders in January, when they finish. Some of them want to sit around for a while. Some of them sit around for two or three years.”

Fermentation

“Ideally, we’re fermenting everything in stainless. That’s part of the reason we freeze some of our juice—even the harvest juices or high-tannin juices—because when we’re fermenting in stainless, we’ve got temperature control. It’s just such a more reliable ferment, and there’s no sense taking chances on a greater likelihood of malolactic fermentation and other crazy things happening.

“We do a lot of our co-ferments in macro bins. If we’ve got whole fruit—cherries or gooseberries or grapes, whatever—we’re punching down in macro bins for at least the first half of fermentation. But typically,

we’re doing that at the time of the year when it’s warm enough. It’s hard to catch them when they’re fermented and finished within a week. We have fermented in the amphora, but I’m a bigger fan of aging in the amphora just because it does such a crazy thing to the pH. The calcium and other minerals in the clay tend to shift the pH of the must upwards; until I have a little more experience with how this affects fermentation chemistry and kinetics, I prefer the amphora for post-fermentation time.”

Building a Harvest-Driven Cider

“We know what’s given us good stuff in years past. We take into consideration the way the apples are looking, the way the weather has been, the Brix as we’re picking them, and we make a decision right then: Are we going to pitch a yeast, or are we going to go spontaneous? Do we want

the yeast to struggle, or do we want to give them nutrition? The decision tree of a normal fermentation is complicated.

“Then you get it started fermenting. You’re tasting it every day, or every other day, just to make sure that it’s got what it needs—that it’s in a healthy spot that’s not going too fast. If you go too fast on a high-aroma apple, you’re blowing off aromatics. So, we’ll slow it down either with a partial filtration or we’ll rack it off the gross lees to reduce the big yeast load in there. We want to just bump along nicely, and sometimes we’ll control the temperature to do that, but then you risk making the yeast unhappy if you drop the temperature. It’s all of these subtle manipulations that you do when it’s in tank, in primary.

“We’re about half-and-half on harvest series, whether we pitch yeast or go spontaneous. We’re doing a little bit of *pied de cuve*, where you take a bottle from last year or even fresh juice, and you grow a yeast rather than letting it go spontaneous, in a really slow, slow, long lag phase. You’re much more likely to get *Kloeckera*, *Candida*—some of the funkier things will come in before the *Saccharomyces*. But if you do *pied de cuve*, you’re increasing the likelihood it’s just *Saccharomyces*, but it’s wild *Saccharomyces*.

“Once it finishes, we’re tasting it. Does it have the structure we want? Is it something that’s going to grow *into* the structure we want? We have a sense of how tannins develop in different apples, and you can bet that they go from being grippy and dry to becoming more juicy without gaining any sugar. They just taste juicy and have a perceived sweetness over time from those tannins.

“But I can tell [that] if it’s missing mid-palate, it’s never going to get mid-palate in aging unless it has time in oak or gets a little bit of oxidation. But controlled oxidation is best done in oak. Even if you take only a portion of the batch and put it in oak, so that we’re not taking up a ton of barrels for each batch, then you can blend it back in with this oak-aged stuff. We also have stuff that’s been [on] oak for years. We can always blend that back in. I have Porter’s Perfection from three

years ago in an oak barrel that I can pull into a Porter's Perfection blend if I want."

Single-Varietals Blended from Different Batches

"There are no laws surrounding single-varietal ciders. Each appellation in France or Italy has different rules about what a single-varietal wine is. It can be 80 percent, it can be 85 percent, it can be 100 percent in some places. Single-varietal does not mean it has to be 100 percent in the market.

"For us, that's the way we do it, primarily because it's an easy reminder. If it says SV, then I know it's 100 percent. If it doesn't say SV, but it says Porter's Perfection cider, then I know that we blended in something at some point. Under the rules, it's still a single-varietal, but we just don't say it. It's no high-horse thing. It's just so we know because different batches we do differently."

The Future of Single-Varietal Ciders

"In an ideal world, in my mind, you would go to a bottle shop that would have all kinds of 750 ml bottles, and you would pick out three single-varietals of the same varietal by three different producers. You could put them side by side and say, 'How much of this difference [among them] is because of the maker? How much is because of the land? How much is because of the geographical location?'

"The whole goal of harvest ciders is to have them tell a story. In cider, we are fighting so hard for harvest-driven ciders to be understood in the same way as wine, to have the same message that terroir matters, the weather matters. It all matters." 



MAKE IT

Bauman's Mountain Rose Single-Varietal Cider

At Bauman's Cider in Gervais, Oregon, owner and cidemaker Christine Walker prefers to bottle her ciders as single-varietals whenever the harvest makes it possible. This one uses the red-fleshed Mountain Rose apple, also known as Hidden Rose or Airlie Red Flesh apple, which is native to Airlie, Oregon, in the Willamette Valley.

"There are many red-fleshed apples grown around the world, and I have always found them to be high in aromatics and acid, which both lend to more interesting ciders," Walker says. "Mountain Rose apples don't have much by way of structural tannins, so they can be enjoyed within a week of finishing. The anthocyanins offer antioxidant protection, so it ages beautifully. I just drank a five-year-old bottle of Mountain Rose cider and couldn't have been happier with it."

CIDER

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

OG: 1.051 (12.6°P)

FG: 0.999 (-0.3°P)

ABV: 6.9%

INGREDIENTS

5 gallons (19 liters) Mountain Rose apple juice

3 ml Pec5L pectic enzyme

YEAST

Lalvin EC-1118

DIRECTIONS

Add the enzyme and yeast to a sanitized fermentor, then pour the fresh juice on top. Aerate or oxygenate the juice, and then repeat after 12–24 hours. Patiently ferment at 54–58°F (12–14°C) until complete, then gently rack off the lees into a secondary fermentor. If the body isn't as hearty as you'd like, you can do a little *sur lie* aging: A day or two after specific gravity hits 1.000, gently stir to rouse the lees, then rack after allowing it to settle. Backsweeten if desired, package, and carbonate.

CIDEMAKER'S NOTES

Delicate Hue: Because this is a red-fleshed apple, we're careful not to use any sulfites around the juice or finished cider that might compromise the color. If you're cleaning any equipment or vessels with an oxidizing sanitizer or cleaner, do a citric-acid rinse before contact with juice or cider.

Fermentation: The EC1118 strain is straightforward, with a wide range of acceptable temperatures and relatively low nutrient needs. I add a small dose of pectic enzyme to help with clarity. I prefer to ferment red-flesh ciders (and most other ciders) a little cooler because a warmer, more vigorous ferment blows off a lot of those wonderful apple aromatics. I like to keep it cool and slow.

Backsweetening: I tend to backsweeten with a little organic cane sugar. I think the sweetness balances that gorgeous acid profile. To preference, obviously, but I typically like a final gravity sweetened to 2 points.

Tannin addition: Since sulfites are not a good option for antioxidant protection in this cider, you might try adding a scant 1/8 tsp of finishing tannins, such as Enartis Hideki.

Pét-Nat option: I will often bottle at about 1.005–1.007, for natural carbonation. This will take the cider to completely dry, but it's still lovely.

